

## U.S. POLICY IN UKRAINE

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USAWC CLASS OF 2009

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. <b>PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.</b>					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 03-02-2009		2. REPORT TYPE Strategy Research Project		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE U.S. Policy in Ukraine				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Commander Justin Richards				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Dr. Craig Nation Department of National Security and Strategy				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College 122 Forbes Avenue Carlisle, PA 17013				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution A: Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT It is time to review and update the U.S. policy in Ukraine. Ukraine is experiencing a period of major turbulence with the economic situation and the dynamic political realignment. The recent Russian actions in Georgia have highlighted the potentially volatile situation in Crimea and emphasize the need to review U.S. policy now. The revised policy with Ukraine needs to include increased international integration, improved economic ties and a shift away from the push for a NATO Membership Action Plan. The policy development needs to include a review of policy conducted together with the other countries in the region and must be developed with an understanding of how Russia impacts Ukraine and the region.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Georgia, Crimea, Russia					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT  UNLIMITED	18. NUMBER OF PAGES  26	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)



USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**U.S. POLICY IN UKRAINE**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

AUTHOR: Commander Justin Richards  
TITLE: U.S. Policy in Ukraine  
FORMAT: Strategy Research Project  
DATE: 3 February 2009      WORD COUNT: 5099      PAGES: 26  
KEY TERMS: Georgia, Crimea, Russia  
CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

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## U.S. POLICY IN UKRAINE

Ukraine is experiencing a period of major turbulence. There are several significant events taking place in Ukraine that demonstrate now is the time to reexamine U.S. policy in the region. All of these events point to a dynamic situation in the country that has the potential to alter its course. The key aspect in this is to determine the best way to meet our national objectives that will also serve Ukrainian interests.

Ukraine shares many characteristics with the Republic of Georgia. Both are former republics of the Soviet Union, both have made moves to shift their relationships away from Russia and toward the West, and both have large segments of ethnic Russians or pro-Russian ethnic minorities concentrated in key sections of their countries. Russia recently used the situation in the two Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to effectively take over those regions and attempt to coerce the government of Georgia into a more pro-Russian stance. The Crimean peninsula in Ukraine is currently home to the Russian Black Sea Fleet which is based on a leased naval facility in Sevastopol. Although this lease will expire in 2017, there are indications that Russia has no intention of leaving. The population in Crimea is pro-Russian and there have been some protests although the situation is not anywhere close to the level of instability of either Abkhazia or South Ossetia. What is the best policy that the U.S. can implement in order to prevent an Ossetia-type situation from happening in Crimea? How do we support a democratic Ukraine achieve its political goals without making Russia feel threatened?

There are several current events in Ukraine that drive the need for us to review our policy. These reasons include, but are not limited to, the recent Russian invasion of

the Republic of Georgia, the current Ukrainian economic downturn, the changing status of the ruling political coalition, and the beginning of a new U.S. administration. In August of 2008, Russia sent troops into Georgia under the guise of defending its citizens. The final result of this invasion was Russia officially recognizing the independence of two breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>1</sup>

There are similarities between these regions and the Crimean peninsula that have some people concerned that Russia may try a similar approach to gain control of that region. Ukraine is experiencing an economic crisis and the IMF recently designated almost \$16.5 billion in assistance which seems relatively small by U.S. standards, but is significant given the size of the Ukrainian economy.<sup>2</sup> Not only is there a new U.S. administration in office in 2009, but there will be a new Ukrainian government as well. President Viktor Yushchenko recently dissolved parliament and called for new parliamentary elections after his coalition with Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko fell apart.<sup>3</sup> Any one of these events individually would create a situation where U.S. policy should be reviewed, but the confluence of them makes it all but essential to review our plan.

### History of Georgia

Georgia was one of the fifteen union republics that made up the Soviet Union. On April 9, 1991 the Georgian parliament declared the country's independence as the Soviet Union broke apart.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after the breakup, the security and stability situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia began to deteriorate. It isn't that any of the issues suddenly came into existence, but that they had never been allowed to grow unchecked during the period the region was under the control of the Soviet Union. The two regions

have actually been striving for autonomy for centuries.<sup>5</sup> Abkhazia in particular has had some degree of autonomy from the rest of current day Georgia on and off over the centuries. This was even true under the Soviet Union where Abkhazia held the status of an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. South Ossetia was also given a degree of autonomy when “the Soviet Government declared South Ossetia to be an autonomous oblast within Georgia in April 1922.”<sup>6</sup> For both Abkhazia and South Ossetia “...with the establishment of Soviet power in Georgia in 1921, they were given their own cultural and political autonomy.”<sup>7</sup>

Following the breakup of the USSR, and really because of the involvement of Russia, the people in these two regions have been able to make progress towards independence. Without this assistance from Russia, it is unlikely they would have been able to make much progress. Georgia had, and still has, the desire to keep both regions as part of their country. In fact they consider them an integral part of their country.<sup>8</sup> This strong desire to hold on to Abkhazia and South Ossetia led to policies that actually motivated the two regions to move towards independence. These policies included everything from outlawing regional political parties to direct military confrontations.<sup>9</sup> It can be argued that were it not for Russian support, Georgia could have held on to both regions militarily.<sup>10</sup> They were able to hold on to the regions under the pressure and interference that Russia was putting into the regions, however they could not overcome the military power of Russia.

As the situations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia began to deteriorate in the early 1990s, international organizations including the UN and CSCE (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe – now OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation

in Europe) became involved, first as observers and later as peacekeepers. UN Security Council Resolution 858 proposed including Russian units in the interim monitoring groups designed to consolidate the cease fire which had been signed between the Republic of Georgia and forces in Abkhazia.<sup>11</sup> Multiple follow on UN Security Council Resolutions have renewed the mandate for peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia. Russian forces entered South Ossetia as part of the Joint Peacekeeping Forces following the June 1992 Sochi Agreement.<sup>12</sup> While it can be disputed how effective the Russian forces were in their attempts, or even their real mission, it must be remembered that their presence in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia is entirely legitimate based on the mandates from both OSCE and the UN.

Once Georgia took the bait and launched a military operation in August 2008, the final outcome was set. It is widely known that Russia wanted a change in the Georgian Presidency to someone other than Mikheil Saakashvili, but it is not known for certain if this was one of the goals of the August 2008 invasion of Georgia. During the invasion, Russian troops pushed well outside of South Ossetia and advanced to within 30 miles of Tbilisi and, while unlikely, it is certainly possible that the original plan was to capture the city and depose the Georgian President.

Russia has justified its military operations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the basis of humanitarian assistance and defense of its citizens living in Georgia.<sup>13</sup> Although they make this claim, it is important to note that they are quick to support the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia while they are themselves deep in struggle with a comparable situation in Chechnya. It is also interesting to recognize that many of the issues Russia is claiming to be battling are ones that it

created. Russia has given Russian citizenship to many in the breakaway regions, issued them passports, and then claimed that it has a duty to intervene because its citizens are living in the area.<sup>14</sup>

### History of Crimea

The Ukrainian region that bears the greatest similarity to South Ossetia or Abkhazia is the Crimea. Despite the many similarities between Georgia and Ukraine, it is important to understand that the situation in Crimea is different from that in either Abkhazia or South Ossetia in several key ways. These differences include geography, ethnic diversity, history of occupation/control of the region, and what the regions have experienced in the way of autonomy over time. The Russian-Ukrainian relationship also has a very different character than the Russian-Georgian relationship.

Unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Crimea is a peninsula and does not share a land border with Russia. This is not to say that Crimea is physically isolated from Russia. In fact, it is just a few miles between the eastern point of the Crimean peninsula and the coast of Russia across the Kerch Strait. The geography of Crimea does not preclude Russia from conducting a military operation there that is similar to what they did in Georgia, but it does make it immensely more complicated. Unless Russia decides to invade Ukraine from the east and drive several hundred miles to Crimea, they would either have to conduct an amphibious operation or rely on the forces they already have on the peninsula at Sevastopol.

Russia has a significant military presence currently based at the naval facility in Sevastopol, Crimea. In June 2008, the Black Sea Fleet Commander reported having 35 warships and 11 thousand active duty personnel in Sevastopol.<sup>15</sup> Under the current

lease agreement with Ukraine, Russia will maintain their fleet at this base until 2017.

There have been statements by both sides that demonstrate this will not be an easy issue to resolve. President Yushchenko has held firm to his position that Ukraine does not plan on renewing the lease with the Russians and has even commented that Russia should work towards leaving Ukrainian territory before the 2017 deadline.<sup>16</sup> On the other side, Russia has made clear that it would like to maintain the Black Sea Fleet at its historic home in Sevastopol.

Ukraine is made up of a myriad of different ethnic groups, with the largest components being Russians and Ukrainians. While there are large numbers of ethnic Russians throughout Ukraine, they make up a local majority only in Crimea and a few districts in Eastern Ukraine. The population of Ukraine is 73 percent ethnic Ukrainian and 22 percent ethnic Russian. According to the 2001 Ukrainian census, the population of Crimea is 58.5% Russian, 24.4% Ukrainian, and 12.1% Tatar.<sup>17</sup>

The Tatars add an additional dynamic to the political mosaic on the Crimean peninsula. In 1944 Stalin forcibly moved the vast majority of Tatars from Crimea to Uzbekistan and other parts of the Soviet Union as collective punishment for presumed collaboration with the German occupation. This population started moving back to Crimea in the late 1980s thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika, in order to live in the lands that they always believed to be their homeland. This return slowed significantly in the early 1990s, but continues even today. Although relatively small at this time, both the size and influence of the Tatar population is growing. Like any group that has been gone for half a century, they are finding it difficult to get reestablished in the land they left and fit into the society that has developed while they were gone.

While the Tatars have tended to side with the Ukrainian position over the Russian position, their real desire is for Crimea to become an autonomous region again.<sup>18</sup> Given the option of maintaining the current status or Crimea being returned to Russia, they would clearly prefer Crimea to remain part of Ukraine.

Historically, the Crimean peninsula has not experienced the consistently fractured rule that was experienced by Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Over much of the past millennium, Crimea was held by several different empires, being ruled by each for several hundred years at a time. The Tatars conquered Crimea during the 13<sup>th</sup> century and essentially ruled it until it was captured by the Russians in 1783.<sup>19</sup> Crimea was established as an autonomous region in 1921 and held this status until it was abolished by Russian Secretary General Joseph Stalin after World War II.<sup>20</sup> Under the Soviet Union Crimea was administered by Russia until 1954 when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea from Russia to Ukraine as part of the celebration of the 300 year anniversary of the Treaty of Pereyaslav which joined Russia and Ukraine. “The decree, which ran a mere eight lines, stated that this measure was being taken because of ‘the economic commonalities, territorial closeness, and communication and cultural links’ between Crimea and Ukraine.”<sup>21</sup>

Relations between Russia and Ukraine are not always the most congenial, but they are also not as poor as they have been between Russia and Georgia. The biggest issues are Ukraine’s western leaning tendency, the ongoing debate about Ukrainian aspirations to join NATO, and the basing of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol. One of the clearest manifestations of the tensions between the two countries is the disputes over natural gas pricing and pipeline transit over the last few years. Ukraine

imports almost 80 percent of its oil and 77 percent of its natural gas, the majority of which comes from Russia.<sup>22</sup> Russia also supplies much of Europe with gas via pipelines that transit Ukraine.

Since the Soviet Union broke apart, Ukraine has purchased Russian gas at a price below the rest of the European market in exchange for Russia's use of the pipelines crossing the country to reach other customers. In the last few years there have been several rounds of discussions about Ukraine paying the same market price as everyone else, and how much Russia should pay Ukraine in transit fees for the use of the pipelines. In January of 2006 after Russia and Ukraine failed to reach agreement on an increase in the price Ukraine should pay for gas, Russia attempted to cut off the supply of gas to Ukraine. However Ukraine siphoned off some of the gas from the pipeline that was intended for other customers which created additional supply problems downstream.<sup>23</sup>

Russia has again decided to raise the price of gas it sells to Ukraine and the two countries are again conducting talks to resolve the issue. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin warned Ukraine in early December that Russia may cut off gas supplies to Ukraine if the Ukrainians try to siphon off gas intended for other customers.<sup>24</sup> Ukraine and Russia did not reach an agreement in December and on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009 Russia reduced the flow of gas through Ukraine amid accusations that Ukraine was stealing gas although it continued to ship gas intended for other European customers.<sup>25</sup> Russia cut off all gas deliveries to Europe through Ukraine on January 7<sup>th</sup><sup>26</sup> EU officials joined the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine because of the impact the gas shortages are having in many European countries. The three parties reached an agreement but



disputes over implementation erupted almost immediately. At the time of writing this issue has not been resolved.

All of this clearly demonstrates that the situation in Crimea is very different from that in Georgia during August 2008. Even with these distinctions there are people that are concerned with what the Russians may attempt to do based on their overt actions in Georgia. The differences do not mean that the Russians will attempt to achieve a different result, but rather that there is no guarantee that they will be successful if they do try.

#### Current Policy

As dynamic as the situation is in Ukraine, the national interests of the United States in the region remain the same. The primary interests are regional stability and ensuring the flow of energy resources. For the Ukraine specifically, another interest is maintaining a democratic government that has positive relations with the West.

In January 2005 both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives passed resolutions that, among other things, pledged “U.S. help for Ukraine’s efforts to develop democracy, a free market economy, and integrate into the international community of democracies.”<sup>27</sup> Prior to these resolutions, the U.S. State Department made clear the U.S. position that it “very firmly and strongly supports Ukraine’s territorial integrity.”<sup>28</sup> On September 5, 2008 Vice President Richard Cheney held a press conference after meeting with President Yushchenko in Kyiv where he highlighted U.S. interests:

President Bush has asked me to give a clear message to the people of Ukraine: The United States has a deep and abiding interest in your well being and security. For almost two decades, we have stood by you to help you secure your independence, sovereignty and integration into the international community. Today, we proclaim our unwavering determination to strengthen the bonds between our countries – not just

now, but for the long term...My country's position is clear: The United States fully supports the right of Ukraine to build ever-stronger ties of cooperation and security throughout Europe, and across the Atlantic. We believe that a closer strategic relationship is in the interest of all. As free countries, we believe in representative government, open trade, and common security...Ukraine's best hope to overcome these threats is to be united – united domestically first and foremost, and united with other democracies.<sup>29</sup>

In late September President Yushchenko came to the United States and met with President George Bush. The two held a joint news conference on September 29 at the White House where President Bush emphasized these same issues as having been just discussed in private between the two presidents.”<sup>30</sup> These meetings, and the consistency of the messages over the last few years, should clearly demonstrate to both domestic and foreign audiences what the U.S. perceives as its enduring interests in the region.

### Future Policy

While the recent Russian invasion of the Republic of Georgia has brought Ukraine and the potential for a controversy to develop over Crimea out into the public light, it is only one of the issues that have to be reexamined in a new U.S. policy for Ukraine. The other three items that need to be addressed in a revised policy are the current state of the Ukrainian economy, the current status of the Ukrainian government, and the potential for benefits from the change of U.S. administration.

Every one of the issues discussed above has the potential to impact regional stability. The flow of energy resources from the region continues to be an issue. In the last three years Russia has twice cut off the flow of gas. This is an ongoing issue in the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, and it impacts much of Europe since the

majority of Russian gas exported to European customers flows through the pipelines in Ukraine.

With these major interests in mind, the desired end state is an independent Ukraine governed by a democratically elected leadership with a stable economy that is closely integrated with the West. A critical point of understanding is that the goal is a Ukraine that is integrated with the West, not one that is either hostile to or coerced by Russia. A hostile or antagonistic relationship between Ukraine and Russia will only result in reduced regional stability over time.

Ukraine, like Russia and the United States, seeks to achieve its own national interests. The leaders try to achieve this in the manner they believe to be the best for the country. The politics of Ukraine is split into many parties that cover the entire political spectrum. The first bloc under President Yushchenko believes this can be best achieved by aligning Ukraine with the West. The bloc led by Viktor Yanukovich favors close ties with Russia. The third of the three major blocs is lead by Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and is the most centrist of the three. Tymoshenko's position is more ambiguous on the question or orientation toward Russia or the West, and seems to have taken both sides at various times. Ukrainian politics are dynamic with coalitions forming and breaking apart more frequently than in other countries. The next presidential elections are currently scheduled for 2010 and there is certainly no guarantee that the winner will be another pro-West president.

The major ways to be used under a revised U.S. policy in Ukraine are increasing economic engagement, improving Ukrainian self defense capabilities through security cooperation programs, and increasing their participation in International Governmental

Organizations (IGOs), specifically continuing to push for them to achieve membership in the EU. The major means include economic incentives for companies that increase investment and trade with Ukraine, military to military contacts, diplomatic efforts with the EU countries to gain membership support, and strategic communications aimed at the U.S. and European audiences that focus on the region's importance and explain why it is worth expending resources there. Influencing the domestic environment is one of the items that must be initiated immediately for the policy to succeed since there is a general lack of knowledge about Ukraine and the region in general among the American public. Without a greater understanding of the situation and why it is important for the U.S. to be engaged, it will be difficult to gain Congressional support and thus the resources to fund essential programs.

The U.S. should actively develop its engagement plan with Ukraine. While the time for the plan is not critically short, there is already a potential timeline imposed on the process because of the 2017 limit on the lease for the base at Sevastopol, so there is no time to waste either. Part of this plan needs to be encouraging and involving other countries to participate, or become involved on their own with Ukraine. Thus part of the U.S. achieving its goals will be its ability to influence third party countries to expand their engagement with Ukraine. The primary ways for this plan are increasing world interest and engagement in Ukraine and the region, and increasing Ukrainian participation in IGOs, specifically pushing European countries to admit Ukraine to the EU. The major means for achieving success include strategic communications to educate and inform foreign governments and populations about the region, diplomatic discussions and

negotiations, and economic incentives for countries and corporations that increase investment and trade with Ukraine.

A primary component for the U.S. to achieve its goals is that Ukraine not just maintains but continues to expand its participation in IGOs. Increasing Ukrainian participation will further improve its economic and political ties to the global community, and thus the West, and will counter any potential for growing Russian domination. The two organizations that would best achieve this are NATO and the EU. One of the key questions concerning current and proposed policies is which of these two organizations is considered a better fit for Ukraine. Economic and governmental stability is a requirement for entry into both organizations and Ukrainian membership in either, or both, would help the U.S. achieve its objectives.

While there is some level of controversy within both NATO and the EU about the potential for Ukraine joining, there are several notable negatives that pose barriers to Ukraine achieving NATO membership. The first is the high level of opposition from Russia. Since NATO is seen by Russia and some other nations as an extension of the U.S. rather than an independent organization, the revised U.S. policy should include the U.S. backing off from its current position that NATO should offer Ukraine a MAP. This is not to imply that NATO should determine who to admit to its ranks based on input from Russia. Each case must be evaluated on its own merits, and the Ukrainian case needs to include an understanding of what would happen with Russia. The second problem with Ukraine joining NATO is that it is not popular among the Ukrainian population as a whole. The level of support from the Ukrainian population is about 30 percent and just over ten percent of parliamentary deputies actively back joining.<sup>3132</sup>

In contrast to NATO, Ukrainian membership in the EU is not actively opposed by Russia and is supported by half of the Ukrainian population and all of the major political parties.<sup>33</sup> EU members are divided on the issue of additional expansion of the organization and Ukrainian membership and have instead decided to pursue relations with Ukraine under their European Neighborhood Policy. Even though the EU may not offer Ukraine membership in the near future, it does acknowledge the importance of improving and expanding ties. "it is also in the EU's vital interest to contribute to the development of stability, better governance and economic development at its Eastern borders"<sup>34</sup> Ukraine, it should be noted, is an active subject of the European Neighborhood Policy.

The proposed policy is not dependent on outside countries and/or organizations to achieve our objectives, although their participation does make it both easier and quicker. If the U.S. were to choose a plan that depended too heavily on other countries to execute then in addition to having to convince them, the U.S. would be dependent on their timeline as well as their methods. It would be more difficult to start this administration executing the same U.S. dominated policy and then try to change later and convince the international community that they should be more involved. (similar to the State Department viewpoint of wanting to be involved from the beginning.)

The risk, and thus the reason not to depend on other countries to execute U.S. policy, is the likely difficulty of convincing other countries to operate in a manner that achieves our objectives as well as their own. There is also the possibility of push back from the EU against the U.S. attempting to pressure the organization into expanding its membership and including Ukraine. The EU has also demonstrated that it will

determine its relationship with Russia based on its own interests. While the EU has made strong statements against the Russian actions regarding the Republic of Georgia, it has also clearly indicated through word and deed that it considers Russia an important economic partner and is not willing to damage its relationship with so important a partner at this time.<sup>35</sup> This also has the potential to have a minor degree of positive impact as well since the European countries will see that the U.S. wants them more involved in dealing with a country that borders them and they may be slightly more willing to participate if they feel they are doing the work themselves and won't be seen as just following a U.S. lead.

Time is a potential factor that could throw off any policy related to Ukraine. The Russian lease at Sevastopol is set to expire in 2017 and the Russian leadership has stated more than once that it wants to keep the base in Sevastopol despite statements by the Ukrainian leadership that they do not intend on extending or renewing the lease.<sup>36</sup> Any U.S. policy in this region must be developed and implemented with this event timeline as a factor. While the eight years until expiration provides sufficient time, it is possible that Russia may do something that will reduce the time available.

Viewing the situation in Ukraine through the lens of the global environment reveals several additional things that must be taken into account when deciding on the policy for Ukraine. The first is how the plan will be viewed in the international community. Much of the world is either suspicious of U.S. motives or uncomfortable with our approach and willingness to go it alone. While Russia would certainly be the most vocal in opposition to this plan, it would not be alone. We may be able to counter this view in the international community. Trying to work within the international

community by increasing globalization and world integration and allowing other countries to operate in the lead could actually improve how we are perceived. Additionally, now may be the right time for the U.S. to update its policy in this region since a new presidential administration may give a changed approach more credibility and ability to influence foreign governments. Immediately following the election on November 4<sup>th</sup>, there was a surge in positive opinions around the world for what it might mean for the way the U.S. conducts international diplomacy. "The election of Barack Obama opened a floodgate for the world's hope that a new U.S. leader would redeem promises of change, rewrite the political script and provide the kind of leadership that would ease the bitterness of the Bush years."<sup>37</sup>

A policy for Ukraine cannot be made independently and without considering the entire region. The biggest regional issue is how each plan impacts the perception and potential future actions of Russia. Any policy for Ukraine must be aligned with an engagement policy for Russia. Russia will be upset at any movement of Ukraine toward a more western leaning government. However, they will also view a shift away from the current U.S. push for Ukraine to receive a MAP for NATO membership as a victory. Russia is likely to be much more receptive to the idea of Ukrainian membership in the EU, even though this is likely to be seen as a move toward the West and away from Russia. Russia perceives they have some ability to influence the EU based on their level of energy dependence on Russia, although it could also be said that Russia depends on the EU as a market for its energy exports.



## Conclusions

The Ukrainian government must choose its own path and with which countries and IGOs to align itself. The U.S. prefers them to be aligned with the West, but this could be dangerous for Ukraine. They are in a fragile position in view of the current economic and political situations. The Crimea is a particularly vulnerable point of exposure, especially in the context of the recent events in the Republic of Georgia. This is a potential flash point in the region that many are concerned about. Unlike many of the political issues in the region, this one has a digital solution and a time limit for resolution. There are fears that Russia is already starting to take actions similar to what they did prior to the August invasion of Georgia, including the issuing of Russian passports to people living in Crimea.<sup>38</sup> Russia and Ukraine have many cultural and economic ties and Crimea holds symbolic importance for Russia. Russia must be convinced that it is not in its best interest for a Crimean crisis to develop. While Russia cannot be allowed to dictate U.S. policy, it is an important regional player and its potential actions must be considered. The U.S. policy with Ukraine must be structured such that Russia does not feel threatened.

While the U.S. objectives regarding Ukraine and the region have not changed, the situation in Ukraine has altered dramatically. The recent Russian actions in Georgia and the Russian-Ukrainian gas dispute have focused world attention on the region. Ukraine is undergoing significant turbulence and has a dynamic political environment. It is clear that now is the time to review and adjust U.S. policy toward Ukraine. It is also clear that additional reviews must be conducted, especially the U.S. policy toward Russia and other key regional players. The major factors in a revised policy with

Ukraine include increased international integration, improved economic ties and a shift away from the push for a NATO MAP.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Steven Lee Myers, "Russian Hopes Obama's Win Will Warm Relations," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/16/world/europe/16medvedev.html?hp> (accessed November 17, 2008).

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